THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CULTURE.

By W. J. Perry.

One of the most striking phenomena in the development of civilisation is the frequency with which nascent civilisations have come to a more or less sudden end. This phenomenon has been so widespread as to cause myriads of thinkers to conclude that culture, like any living organism, is subject to the processes of growth, maturity and decay, so that any civilisation has its life cycle just as has any living organism. The great civilisation of Egypt can be watched in its growth from a stage of culture somewhat akin to that of the palæolithic age, in its proud development of the Pyramid Age, and in its decline after thousands of years of splendour. Assyria sprang up from small origins, had its day of power, and disappeared for ever; so did Crete, Phœnicia, Persia and many other civilisations. For reasons such as these men now speak of the decay of this or that civilisation, and talk of the possibility of the vanishing of civilisation—meaning that of Western Europe—altogether, as the result of the upheaval of war.

It is easy to talk loosely about these facts, and to use biological analogies in the discussion of social processes. But reasoning by analogy is dangerous: it is often the means by which the mentally fogged hope to disperse the mists that lie about their minds. So, leaving the biological analogy alone, let us inquire as to what we really mean by the disappearance of civilisation. In the first place what is meant by "the civilisation of Egypt," "the civilisation of China," "the civilisation of Mexico" and so forth?

For many years, thinkers, dazzled by the glories of the doctrine of evolution, applied it without much criticism to the study of the development of human culture. They assumed, without any detailed examination of the facts, that various peoples, in different parts of the earth, had, independently of one another, elaborated the fundamental arts and crafts. According to this point of view development of culture was inevitable: man was born to dominate the earth, and to master natural forces by some active power of his mind, which was readily called into activity by the force of circumstances. These circumstances it was assumed, were so common, and acted so readily, as to produce advances in culture in all parts of the world independently of one another. This is the doctrine tacitly or avowedly held until within the last few years by the vast majority of thinkers. But when the evidence really came to be examined in this country by Rivers, it was evident that nothing of the sort could be postulated; that, on the contrary, all that could usually be discovered about the origin of the culture of any community was that it derived its cultural heritage from elsewhere. Although Rivers, in his *History*

of Melanesian Society did not develop this part of his theme in detail, yet later advances were implicit in this great work, so that it has become possible, by following the clues given by him, to unravel much of the history of the world's culture. The result of the prosecution of this line of study has been to shew that, far from independent development of culture having taken place in all parts of the world, all the available evidence points to transmission as the predominating factor in the process whereby civilisations have taken their rise in various parts of the earth. That is to say, it can confidently be said that every community which has risen beyond the stage of development of the "food-gatherers" (who still persist in outlying parts of the world)—has derived its cultural capital from some other community. Each community has, in turn, added to or subtracted from its cultural capital, so as to form a distinctive culture. But this culture is only a modification of what we term "Civilisation," and it can only be said to be distinctive of the country in question on the terms just stated. Therefore when we speak of the disappearance of civilisations we mean, if this point of view be adopted, that some community that had acquired a dose of culture from some source or other, had lost a large amount of it, and had sunk in cultural level.

Another point must be made quite clear. What do we mean by civilisation? Do we refer to the command of natural forces which so distinguishes the culture of Western Europe: or do we mean some moral standard of behaviour by which we compare peoples? It is possible to adopt all sorts of measures of civilisation, but it is essential that some standard of reference should be forthcoming. I have no hesitation in taking the material basis as the most satisfactory. When I speak of a drop in cultural level, therefore, I mean that a community has lost some of its arts and crafts, and I make no assumptions whatever with regard to its moral characteristics. Indeed, as can readily be seen, loss of culture might mean the salvation of the soul of a people, it might mean the breaking down of material bonds that impeded the intellectual and moral progress of mankind.

It is possible now to go one step further. Since it can be assumed that every community in the food-producing stage of culture has derived its cultural capital from some other community, and thus in a long chain of communities, from the original food-producing community of all—it follows that a community loses its culture owing to some particular circumstance affecting that community alone. This loss of culture may have nothing to do with the general process of growth and decay of civilisation, considered in its widest sense. It is possible, and indeed has happened continually during the history of civilisation, that communities have lost their cultural capital, while civilisation has been developing. When it is remembered that the communities of America, once given their cultural capital from outside sources, proceeded steadily to dissipate it, while the communities round the Mediterranean were steadily increasing their capital, it can be seen that it does not necessarily follow that, because some communities lose their culture, this loss is an inevitable law.

Another point which must be cleared up is that concerning race and culture. It is difficult to see what influence race has had upon

culture. Generalisations in this direction are dangerous. It is easy to conclude that, because a community has not advanced far on the road to civilisation as we know it, or if it apparently has halted on the road, this community is racially incapable of acquiring the same level of culture as its more fortunate fellows. But this lag in culture may be due to circumstances of position and other accidents. An isolated community in the remote country districts of Britain is not so advanced in culture as London: in the same way a remote community in the Jungles of India may have dozed during the centuries, while the stream of life passed by. The whole problem of the capacity for the acquisition of culture has yet to be approached in the proper manner, for it can safely be said that the materials for the solution of this problem are as yet hardly amassed.

The danger of thinking that a community has its cycles of culture or its fixed potentialities for the absorption of culture is well exemplified in the case of the Japanese. Originally culturally dependent on the Chinese, and scorned by them as hopelessly inferior, the Japanese for centuries did little but imitate the artistic and other products of China. It would seem that they were incapable of the development of an advanced form of culture. But since the middle of last century the Japanese have advanced culturally with vast strides, until they are on a par with the most developed civilisations of the world. It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of the cultural history of Japan as subject to the cycles so beloved of many thinkers of to-day. China, again, the original civiliser of Japan, affords another instance of the capacity of a community to persist through thousands of years with its culture virtually unimpaired.

When we speak of the disappearance of a civilisation, say, that of Assyria, what do we really mean? It is too often assumed that the civilisation of any people can be equated to the people themselves, as if it were somehow an expression of their innate physical and intellectual capacities. Thus we speak of the civilisation of France and of Germany, as if, in some way, there were an equation between the two elements, people and culture. Whereas, as is evident, the culture of France is the result of various historical processes, in which the element of race has played a very problematical part indeed. We can have peoples of varying physical types possessing the same cultures, while peoples of the same physical type have different cultures. When, therefore, we speak of the disappearance of a civilisation, we usually mean the actual loss of arts and crafts, and not necessarily the disappearance of a population. Of course, it may indeed happen that the two processes are linked together in some particular case, but it need not be so. In the central parts of Asia there are numerous ruins of deserted settlements, abandoned, doubtless, on account of the gradual dessication of the country. Both the people and the culture have gone. If the people go, so obviously does the culture. But that need not necessarily always happen. A people can lose its culture, like, say, the Etruscans, and yet remain in the country.

The problem of the disappearance of civilisations can thus be divided, it seems, into two parts. In the first place there is that of the disappearance of the population itself; and there is the disappearance of the culture while the population remains virtually unaltered.

The second instance of the disappearance of culture is by far the more important. For it can be said, roughly, that the peoples of the earth have wandered very little from their original areas of specialisation. We find the Mongols spread over a compact area; similarly with the negroes, the people of Mediterranean stock, the Nordics and so forth. The so-called Alpine, Armenoid or Central race has wandered most of all; but this wandering apparently has had but little effect on the development of culture, though it has been responsible for a certain amount of culture-dispersion. The population of Britain is, broadly speaking, what it was in the days when food-producers first appeared on the scene. The subsequent incursions of Celts, Teutons, and Romans, not to speak of the Normans, have had but little effect on the physical characteristics of our population.

What is the cause of the disappearance of culture which has so often taken place in all parts of the earth. In order to answer that question we must know something of the way in which culture has been transmitted from one community to another. I do not propose to temporise with current views concerning the possible modes of transmission of culture, but rather to study one particular instance where enough knowledge for the present purpose has already been accumulated. I shall take my facts from the report lately published by Dr. Reisner of his excavations in Ethiopia, and published in volumes five and six of the *Harvard African Studies*. By means of his work in Nubia and the Sudan we have been able to acquire much information of the exact manner by which culture is transmitted, and to estimate the causes which lead to the modification and disappearance of that culture.

This work of Dr. Reisner deals with the Egyptian colony founded at Kerma in Nubia during the Middle Kingdom by a Prince named Hepzefa, who was sent by the king to guard the road to the south, whence came supplies of gold, ivory, slaves and so forth. In founding this settlement the Egyptians were simply carrying on the policy of extending their influence into places whence they got supplies of raw materials, and thus setting in motion a process that was destined ultimately to encompass the world. In the case of Kerma the date of the settlment can be put back at least as far as the time of the Sixth Dynasty, about the middle of the Third Millennium before Christ, when there was a trading post in that place. Ethiopia was always a mere land of roadways, a barren land across which it was necessary to penetrate in order to get access to the gold of the south. In the Middle Kingdom Amenenhat I. and II. founded Kerma, and in the time of Sesostris I. Hepzefa of Assiut was sent to Kerma, and lived there with a considerable Egyptian community. The results of this occupation were remarkable and illuminating, for it is possible by studying them to understand many obscure points in the diffusion of culture.

It is possible to gain a graphic idea of the manner by which the Egyptians influenced Nubia and the south by studying the household of Hepzefa. As Reisner says: "In the great houses in Egypt, as depicted on the walls of the tombs of the princes of Beni Hassan, a most strict division of labour appears, so that an enormous family seems to be a self-sufficient industrial and agricultural group producing not merely

all its own food, but all the other necessities and luxuries of daily life. We find there not only sowing and reaping, hunting and fishing, dancing and feasting, but also the manufacture of cloth, sandals, pottery, stone vessels, wooden furniture, bows and arrows, metal objects, and practically everything known to have been used.'' Prince Hepzefa belonged to Assiut, and presumably had a household of this nature. When, therefore, he went to Kerma, it is highly probable that he took with him such a community to supply his needs, as is the case now with Oriental potentates.

What was the effect of the sudden transplantation of Egyptian craftsmen into a new environment, among people who knew little or nothing of the various arts and crafts that they practised? The statues, scarabs, stone vessels, beads and amulets are typically Egyptian, and would pass unquestioned in an Egyptian tomb of the period. It is therefore clear that the manufacture of these articles was demanded by Egyptian custom, and, given materials of the right sort, the craftsmen would cling to the Egyptian technique. But the Egyptian craftsmen were in a new environment. The life at Kerma gave rise to new customs, such as bed-burial and the use of caps decorated with mica. The carpentry of the bed is typically Egyptian, but the actual form has never been found in an Egyptian grave, much less the patterns of ivory inlays with which they are decorated. The caps, on the other hand, appear rather to be adapted from Ethiopian garments. Some of the decorations in ivory and mica contain well-known Egyptian forms, but many of the animals are strange, such, for example, as the horned rhinoceros, the winged giraffe, the ant-bear, the flying bustards and so forth. Yet every figure betrays the facility in copying of the Egyptian craftsmen.

Hepzefa died about 1935-1880 B.C. He probably arrived at Kerma from fifteen to thirty years before his death. During these years the arts and crafts peculiar to Kerma, and in particular the manufacture of pottery, had passed through all their creative stages. ''New developments in arts and crafts, seldom take any great length of time when the moment of change has come; and the combination of trained skill and environment, the conditions which led to the growth of the handicrafts of Kerma, were all present from the first day on which Hepzefa and his people arrived at that place. Training and skill, and a body of technical traditions were imported ready made; the conditions of the environment were natural to the place.'' So the Kerma culture was at a climax in its earliest period.

The sudden culmination of a culture when in a new environment is a commonplace of the diffusion of culture. The best instance is that of the Maya cilivisation of Guatemala, which very rapidly reached its summit, and then gradually but surely decayed, until practically nothing of it was left but its ruins. A parallel instance is to be found in the case of the earliest pottery at Susa, the ancient capital of Persia. This pottery is immensely superior to that which followed. This can well be the work—indeed it must have been—of skilled potters who, coming from elsewhere and feeling the stimulus of a new paste and other local conditions, were induced to make something new and wonderful.

Then follows the characteristic phenomenon of development of an

introduced culture. I quote the words of Reisner. He says that the development of the Kerma culture "is a fairly simple one. After the burial of the members of the colony who came with Hepzefa, one craft after another begins to fail, some sooner and some later; but in the end the Egyptian traditions are almost dead, and those which were finally passed on to the men of the Nubian period are mostly so modified as to cease to be recognisable as Egyptian. In the end, environment overcame the acquirements of the early immigrants, even though the colony was probably reinforced by fresh accessions in later years." That is to say, the series began with a pure Egyptian culture, and ended with one that is called 'Nubian.' "This derived culture acquired so much power of resistance that it was hardly modified by fresh impulses arriving from Egypt."

In these few statements from Reisner we have the epitome of the mechanism of culture—transmission and modification throughout the world. Once these principles are grasped, much becomes clear that previously was obscure.

In *The Children of the Sun* I examined the cultural history of the great region stretching eastwards from Egypt to America, and concluded from the evidence that the earlest stage of food producing culture was higher than those which followed, with certain reservations in the case of India. My argument rested, of course, on the basis of the material arts and crafts. The great ruins of Ponape in the Carolines, the pyramids of Cambodia and of Java, and countless large stone monuments scattered throughout this vast region testify to the high degree of culture possessed by the folk of the archaic civilisation. This ancient civilisation was destined in all parts of this vast region to fall into decay, the craft of stoneworking was abandoned, cultivation by irrigation gave rise to dry cultivation, and life altogether took on a lower level.

How can this fall in culture be explained? I have urged that along with this decay of culture went a growth of warlike behaviour. The archaic civilisation was predominantly peaceful, whereas its successors were warlike. The war machine was getting to work and exercising its dread effects on mankind.* But this does not explain exactly how the disappearance of the arts and crafts took place.

When we recall what happened in the case of the Egyptian colony in Nubia, it is possible to understand with clarity the reason why civilisation can be lowered in standard without any disappearance of population. For the viceroy took with him members of various crafts, who were attached to his household. These crafts were doubtless largely hereditary, so that the elimination of the family which possessed the secrets of the crafts would involve that of the craft itself. This mechanism is precisely that which can be shown to have been at work in Oceania. Dr. Rivers in his remarkable article on The Disappearance of Useful Arts published in *Festskrift Tillagnad Edvard Westermarck* in 1912, had already shown clearly that various arts and crafts have disappeared owing to the dying out of the families that possessed the necessary knowledge. For instance, canoe-making was,

* See *The Growth of Civilization*, 1924, for a description of this process.

in Polynesia, a noble craft. Those who made canoes had to chant certain songs while at work, and the knowledge of these songs was an indispensable part of the craft. When, therefore, a family of canoe-makers died out for any reason, the craft would itself disappear.

It is necessary, therefore, to imagine that in ancient times civilisation was carried about the earth by fairly large groups of people, led by members of a ruling group, together with a certain number of skilled craftsmen. They would settle, as in the case of the Nubian and Sudanese settlement of the Egyptians, in places where there were supplies of gold, copper, or some substance that interested them, and would instal themselves there. They would incorporate the local native population in the lower orders of their community, but would not allow them to gain knowledge of the luxury trades. Consequently the continuance of the higher arts and crafts would depend on the persistence of the hereditary element, on the unbroken continuity in a craft. Once this continuity of craft was broken it would disappear and the drop in cultural level would occur.

One of the most important factors causing a drop in cultural level is the disappearance of a ruling group. The archaic civilisation which spread over the earth was led by the Children of the Sun, together with a nobility. Round this group of rulers the culture of the community really centred. They supplied the skilled craftsmen—as in Tonga—and the hereditary priesthood. All the ceremonial was centred round them. In Egypt it is a well-known principle that innovations were first of all associated with the ruling group, and then gradually filtered down to the rest of the community. This was also the case with the Kerma colony. With the spread throughout the world of the archaic civilisation there came the propagation of the knowledge of arts and crafts and ceremonial associated with this ruling group, and especially with the superior part of it, the family of the Children of the Sun. It is a matter of historical knowledge that this family was eliminated in various places. That elimination would involve much of the culture of the original community. A great part of the ceremonial would disappear, for the simple reason that the few who possessed the knowledge of it no longer existed. We know that, in places where the Children of the Sun once existed, but have since disappeared, the whole of the ritual connected with the sky has gone, or survives only in fragments. The important ritual associated with the sun-god, and elaborate and artificial ritual built up by the priesthood of Heliopolis in Egypt, could only survive with the family that carried it about, the Children of the Sun, and with them it disappeared. Among the rest of the community there was neither the knowledge nor the desire to maintain such cults, so they vanished.

An examination of the records of the family of the Children of the Sun in a country like Burma shows at once that the scheme just put forward is not imaginative. In the story of the foundation of Pegu mention is made of princes who founded Pegu with one hundred and seventy families—just as Hepzefa founded Kerma. *The Glass Palace Chronicles of the Kings of Burma* likewise contain many references to the foundation of cities by members of the royal family, often of the solar line. Evidently it was a constant practice for princes to go out and

found a new settlement for themselves. They would beyond doubt take with them all manner of skilled craftsmen, and would organise the community on the basis of that of their home. The disappearance of the ruling group would leave the community lowered in cultural level: there would no longer be the need for the elaborate technique necessary for the building of temples, for the carving of statuary, for the casting and working of metals, which would form so prominent a part of the culture under the old regime. An incoming band of warlike people would neither understand nor need all these things: they would be content with what they could get in the way of skilled crafts. In Cambodia there are immense ruins made by men coming from India, who left Sanskrit inscriptions behind them. But they were overwhelmed in time by the war-like Tai-Shan folk coming down from the north, and after a short duration all the old order of civilisation had disappeared. Even the language had changed, and Sanskrit had given place to that of the invaders. This simply means that the ruling group had been eliminated, but that the rest of the population had persisted, and had remained on the same level of culture at which it always had been. The skilled element had gone—that is all.

The diasppearance of culture is often accompanied by the appearance of warlike people. These warlike people are almost invariably lower in level, culturally speaking, than those whom they overwhelm. This is easily accounted for. Professor E. H. Parker, in his *Ancient China Simplified* had shown that members of the ruling group of ancient China went out and became the rulers of the barbarians who surrounded them, and adopted the habits of the people among whom they came to dwell. This is precisely what seems to have happened in the case of the Egyptian colony at Kerma. The drop in cultural level, even where a complete community apparently was present in the first instance, was rapid and inevitable. The inertia of the local population is sufficient, in the course of time, to cause the original level of culture to be depressed. Of course, it follows also, that the more highly civilised can raise the cultural level of those among whom they dwell: but they can only do this in a marked manner when their influence is strong and persistent. The Chinese notables who had to flee the country, could not possibly have been able to influence the local natives to any great extent, especially if these were already somewhat organised, and therefore culturally resistant Since warlike peoples have invariably taken their origin on the outskirts of developed civilisations, it follows that they must necessarily be lower in cultural level than the communities to which they owe their cultural capital. When, therefore, they rush in and dominate an advanced civilisation, exterminate the ruling group, and destroy the fabric of the state, it follows necessarily that the level of culture must drop. Anything else would be in the nature of a cultural miracle.

It is evident that the argument just put forward only applies to communities in certain cultural circumstances. In such communities knowledge was in the hands of small groups, and its persistence depended on the physical persistence of these groups. Knowledge was not accessible to one and all. Only the noble canoe-maker of Tonga could make canoes, and sing the necessary songs: no commoner might

hope to attain to the performance of this craft. The knowledge of crafts was not put into writing. Indeed, as culture moved out, as into the Sudan from Egypt, the knowledge of writing itself disappeared. Thus it was possible for the older civilisations, such as those of Assyria, Mexico, and elsewhere, to undergo great transformations, to drop so far in cultural level that their relationship to the original could hardly be detected. But in the case of our western civilisation, the knowledge of the various arts and crafts is so widely diffused that it is not possible to conceive of any convulsion that might eliminate knowledge to such an extent as to cause a great drop in cultural level to take place. The only possibility in this case is that of the elimination of the population owing to physical degeneration, e.g., to the overwhelming increase in such a disease as cancer, so that western civilisation disappeared through lack of population. But short of some incredible horror of that sort there is no reason to believe in any cyclic disappearance of civilisation.